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ABSTRACT

It is argued that in the culturally rich communities developing in the United States, educators can do much more to develop literacy programs that reflect real student needs, differences, and talents. Widespread dependency on pre-defined curricula and assessment is seen as perpetuating outdated classroom strategies and techniques that do not work. A new paradigm for multicultural literacy that acknowledges the role of language as a cognitive and affective factor in human development and learning is proposed. In this approach, schools should be "linguistic zones" in which students and teachers learn to listen to different voices. Empowerment of each individual, by providing a social and cultural context for the use of language to solve problems, is the objective. It is suggested that to make this occur: (1) every classroom must be filled with varied vehicles for communication, (2) all students must enter into a critical dialogue with those outside their cultural communities, and (3) educators must create literature with the people in the communities they teach. Examples of programs in which these things are being done are offered. A brief reference list is included. (MSE)

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The Logic of Language: A Paradigm for Multicultural Literacy

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THE LOGIC OF LANGUAGE: A PARADIGM FOR MULTICULTURAL LITERACY

Presented by: Dr. Kathleen Velsor
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Keynote Address. Thirteenth Annual Bilingual and Multicultural Education Conference, Cleveland Public Schools, Cleveland, Ohio, May 1993.

Perhaps the major weakness facing schools today is the GAP which exists between the human development and learning of our students and the organization we call SCHOOL with its CULTURE and POWER. The BRIDGE is to create a context in which students and schools become culturally and linguistically responsive to each other.

It became increasingly obvious to me as I visited many schools on Long Island that teachers were not responsive to the many faces of culture in their classrooms. As a university professor I work with teachers in the field. Of particular concern is the preparation we offer our students as they are asked to succeed as teachers.

It is truly a challenge for a student teacher to facilitate learning in a first-grade classroom in the Westbury School District, for example, where children from Haiti, Jamaica, Ecuador, Italy, San Salvador, Mexico and Korea are quietly sitting, waiting to be understood. This is not a unique situation. There are pockets of culturally-rich communities on Long Island that are very wealthy districts that have, through religious groups, sponsored families, as well as districts like Westbury that offers affordable housing to emerging cultures and their families.

These emerging cultures challenge educators to create "CULTURALLY DEMOCRATIC" (Darder, 1991) classrooms.

Today we will address our concerns with the practical problem of establishing a foundation for language development as a new paradigm for school organization which is responsive to student of ALL cultures.

PAUSE

Historically, bilingual/multicultural education and its instructional theories have been linked to traditional curriculum content and its assessment. This approach "fosters a dependency" on predefined curriculum . . . outdated classroom strategies and techniques . . . that as educators, we know doesn't work.

Today, we urge you to talk, debate and argue about HOW the HIDDEN FACES and SILENT VOICES of these children can be empowered. HOW they as learners can grow to be self-sufficient, emotionally and politically prepared individuals. HOW we, as educators, can prepare them to actively participate in a culture that has traditionally excluded immigrants.

With this in mind, let's begin a new perspective . . . a paradigm for multicultural literacy that uses the LOGIC of language as a cognitive and affective process in human development and learning.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Studies of children from around the world suggest that there are many similarities about the acquisition of language. Many linguists have believed that the human brain is pre-programmed for language learning. While we may be all equipped at birth to learn a language, the fact remains that we still have to learn it from someone, that is, from the

members of the community in which we live (Harding & Riley, 1986). Language is a social phenomenon, and language learning is therefore a social activity (Harding & Riley, 1986).

PAUSE

I have found that the best way to test a theory is to look back at our own experiences and to ask . . . Think back to your first word. You were probably told by a significant adult what that word was. In my experience, I am a twin. Margaret and I spent a great deal of time together, so much time that we developed our own language. My first word, much to my parents dismay was *there*. A word of *interaction*. I *logically* filtered out the word *there* to interact with my sister.

PAUSE

According to Piaget, the possibility of a verbal exchange with other people, heralds the onset of the SOCIALIZATION OF ACTION. What we want, as educators, is for our students to have a LANGUAGE OF ACTION. My language of action was to communicate with my sister, yours was that which was important to you. This action, in turn, provokes thoughts, an internal language, a system of signs which gives students an ACTIVE SINGULAR VOICE. The social ramifications of language learning allows for literacy to develop . . . but . . .

[Literacy begins at home. Home is our first language zone.]

Antonia Darder, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California in her book *Culture & Power in the Classroom*, states that the language we use "is essential to the process of dialogue, to the development of meaning, and to the production of knowledge." As she says, "It links us to the very existence and meaning of the life experiences of the

community that we live in. Language constitutes a major cornerstone for the development of VOICE."

Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, described this phenomena as the "zone of proximal development." He theorized that these were critical for finding solutions to difficult tasks.

In order for critical multicultural literacy, we all have to be connected:

> Students and families—students and students—teachers and students—teachers and teachers—teachers and administrators—administrators, teachers, students and families . . .

We all have to be connected to become a community of learners. We have to create a social closeness . . . a commonality of experiences in our classrooms. It is imperative for our schools to be LINGUISTIC ZONES in which students and teachers learn to listen to different voices. To speak a different curriculum and to write their own literature so all can be empowered. Providing a social and cultural context for the use of language to solve problems presents a new paradigm for multicultural literacy.

I was sitting in a second grade accelerated class in Westbury. I am always intrigued by the notion of accelerated. I suppose you have to hold onto your seat, which I found myself doing. The lesson was reading from a basal reader, the story of the Gingerbread Man. The teacher was bilingual and my student teacher was also. The lesson began by reading out loud from the text. Pilar, a student from Ecuador read:

> Then, with a flick of his head, the fox tossed the gingerbread man in his mouth. His jaws snapped shut and that was the end of the gingerbread man.

After she decoded the words, she looked at the teachers for recognition with a totally blank expression. She did not understand that the gingerbread man was lunch for the fox. Nor did the teachers know that Pilar had only decoded the words. The teachers responded, nice job, well done.

It was so obvious to me that the Teacher-Text-Student failed to interact. Pilar had no cultural understanding of the Teacher via Text and, in turn, the Teacher had no cultural connection to Pilar via Literacy. *How* could Pilar have a language of action? How could the teacher empower Pilar in this linguistic transaction?

Let's not *fall* into these linguistic traps and fool ourselves that language without a social and cultural context constitute a total empowering learning experience. Pilar has to learn language in a powerful way. She has to be able to manipulate the language of "The Gingerbread Man" to her social and cultural reality.

People who have the power to use language in various ways are the people who can BRIDGE THE GAP (Corson, 1991). Their voices emerge in the political arena of our schools and communities and contribute to its histories . . . Having said that, let us also not fall into another trap: that "simply utilizing a student's primary language guarantees that a student's emancipatory interests are being addressed" (Darder, 1991). In her poem, "A Bicultural Riddle," Antonia Darder writes:

> . . . i eat with equal gusto arroz con pollo
> as I do quiche and croissants
>
> i sit in meetings with harvard-ites
> as i sit with the barrio folks
> on lazy afternoons in the park

the sounds of Spanish beckon my soul
as the sound of English move my mind . . .

As educators of bicultural students, we must create opportunities for children to be linguistically competent in any "word/world."

THIS IS WHERE WE START

First and foremost, every classroom has to be filled with all sorts of vehicles for communication (Hawkins, 1991) for children's voices to emerge. The Reggio Emila Approach to Early Childhood Education focuses on the 100 languages of children in school. This city-run childhood program of Reggio, Italy has been recognized and acclaimed as one of the best systems of education in the world. The system has been refined for over 30 years to utilize and to incorporate many modes of expression including words, movement, drawing, painting, sculpture, shadow play, collage, music . . . into the classroom. This is a *public school* system that involves ALL children, including those with disabilities. If we believe that all children can learn, then providing experiences and materials that represent the language IN USE in the classroom will facilitate literacy and learning.

Second, it is imperative that all students enter into a critical dialogue with those outside their cultural communities (Darder, 1991). Project Orilla, a computer-based Sister Class network developed by Dennis Sayers from Brooklyn College/City University of New York, created a telecommunications network, pairing teachers and students from California with teachers and students from New York. This project builds "long-distance team teaching" partnerships in which their students go far beyond traditional pen-pal correspondence. The

students are engaged in many joint educational projects, such as bilingual newsletters or dual community surveys which integrates the classroom curriculums and validates life experiences.

Computer-assisted writing experiences, such as the one designed for Project Orilla, *promotes cross-cultural dialogues*. Students recognize for themselves their *language of action . . . to define who they are*. Language then becomes a tool to assist them to explore critically those possibilities that have remained hidden and out of their reach (Darder, 1991).

Third, the task for educators is to create literature, TOGETHER, with the people in the communities that we teach. An illiterate community is one for whom written language has no use. It is a community which does not experience written language as a living life element (Arrastia & others, 1991). As teachers, we must write together, using the richness of language that our bicultural students bring into the classroom to create our own literature.

The Mothers' Reading Program in New York City's East Harlem and Lower East Side is an example of how a community becomes literate. By creating literature from their experiences collectively, these women from culturally diverse backgrounds formed powerful bonds. After a few months of dialogue, making texts together, and reading those texts together, individually and in small groups, the group built a pool of shared second language experience in English. Their ability to think critically about their world also grew.

As you can see, we can work together in developing literacy programs that authentically represent the cultural consistency of our classrooms. School can be a place that is responsive to students' needs, differences and talents. We have the theories, practical wisdom, and interactive technologies. It is up to us to put it all together (Sagor, 1988). We just have to believe in ourselves . . . in our sense of power.

We, as educators, have to allow these children to leave the cities of their comfort zones and go into the wilderness of their intuitions. What they will discover is themselves.

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